

Cameron and Hague are wrong – drones and ‘cyber-warfare’ will not replace conventional forces

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With the commencement of coalition air strikes in Libya it is clear that the USA, Britain and NATO have not abandoned conventional measures in favour of ‘cyber-warfare’ and soft power. And yet, many commentators are very enthusiastic about the use of these new methods. [Matthew Partridge](#) looks at the recent rebalancing of defence policy and finds that these new measures may in fact only be only modestly effective.

From the invention of the phalanx in Ancient Greece, to the developments in firearms that speeded up the westward expansion of America and enabled Britain to create an empire “on which the sun never sets”, technology has always played an important role in military history. At the same time there is an emerging consensus in American, Britain and the rest of NATO that resources should be moved away from conventional forces and towards emerging technologies. But some commentators have expressed concerns at the increasing reliance on this new ‘cyber-warfare’, finding that these methods may be far less effective than more conventional measures.

The most enthusiastic advocate of the rebalancing within NATO has been David Cameron. [Last October](#) he attacked the state of the armed forces as only suited to dealing with “Russian tanks rolling across Europe” instead of “the threats of the future”, which he sees as “cyber-warfare, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and failed states”. Consequently, Cameron has sharply cut the budget and personnel of the Army, Navy and RAF, but has increased spending on computer security. While this may seem a cost-effective way to achieve national security, the experience of the [Stuxnet computer virus against Iranian reactors](#) and the unmanned drone programme against insurgents in Afghanistan and Pakistan, suggest that there are limits to the effectiveness of such unconventional weapons.

There is no doubt that the decision to sharply increase the number of drone strikes in Pakistan, from a total of 42 from 2004 to the end of 2008 to 53 in 2009 and 118 last year, has had some success. Ustadh Ahmad Farooq, a terrorist leader in Pakistan, made headlines when intercepted communications recently revealed that he believes that the [strikes are damaging Al-Qaeda](#). Research at Harvard by Patrick B. Johnston and Anoop Sarbahi claims to have discovered empirical evidence suggesting that the [drone strikes have had a positive \(but modest\) impact](#) in reducing the “overall incidence of terrorist attacks and the lethality of these attacks, as well as declines in the incidence of IED and suicide attacks”.

However, retired Lt Colonel David Kilcullen, a former advisor to General David Petraeus and one of the most respected experts on counterinsurgency, disagrees. Far from them dealing a lethal blow to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Kilcullen argues that they have killed few terrorists, and have only succeeded in alienating the wider population. Two years ago he called for the programme to be stopped, claiming that strikes had only killed 16 terrorists in Pakistan, at the cost of 50 civilians per insurgent, a position he recently reaffirmed stating that “it is possible that the political cost of these attacks exceeds the tactical gains”.

Most experts agree that the Stuxnet computer virus, generally acknowledged to be the joint work of US and Israeli scientists, has caused Iranian centrifuges to self-destruct. Mossad Chief Meir Dagan even claimed in January that the rogue software was partly responsible for setting Tehran’s nuclear ambitions back several years. However, Jennifer Dyer, a retired Commander in U.S. Naval Intelligence, cautions that the virus, “has not affected Iran’s ability to develop a nuclear weapon – period”. Specifically, Dyer points out that it has neither affected Iran’s development of a nuclear warhead nor disrupted attempts to enrich uranium to a higher quality, which is in a separate facility to the one targeted by Stuxnet.

She believes that the only thing that Stuxnet has damaged, the enrichment of low-quality uranium, is the one thing Iran can easily replicate, “without having to learn anything new”. Dyer’s views are echoed by the Netanyahu administration, which publicly dismissed Meir Dagan’s estimates as too optimistic. Days after Dagan went public, the Israeli President stated at a January press conference that Iran is still “determined to move ahead despite every difficulty, every obstacle, every setback to create nuclear weapons” and that in terms of regional stability “The first concern is Iran; the second concern is Iran; and the third concern is Iran”.

More importantly, most experts believe that progress in Afghanistan and against the Iranian nuclear programme, still ultimately depends on NATO willingness to make tough choices with conventional forces. Dyer warns that without internal regime change or airstrikes, it is inevitable that Iran will produce nuclear weapons, bluntly stating that “sanctions and computer worms won’t prevent Iran from developing a bomb”. Similarly, a [report](#) by Andrew Exum and Dave Barno of the Center for a New American Security in December contended that an approach focused on drone strikes and relatively small numbers of troops (referred to as ‘counter-terrorism plus’) would quickly lead to a Taliban victory over Karzai’s government.

In this light, Cameron’s strategy of relying on new technologies to maintain Britain’s effectiveness in the age of austerity seems flawed. As events in Libya are tragically demonstrating, even if a call to action on Facebook or Twitter can bring down governments, ground troops, military transports and helicopters can still have an effect in the hands of a determined dictator. Strong words about accountability for despots are welcome, but they will need to be backed up.

While Cameron deserves credit for successfully taking part in the diplomatic push to get a no-fly zone in place, he will need to either increase spending or admit that the Coalition’s cuts will circumscribe Britain’s future ability to defend its interests and values globally.